

Nicaragua, Art and Social Change:  
Interviews with Three Artists

by

Betty LaDuke

Oregon State University

Abstract

Five years after their participation in the successful 1979 revolutionary struggle against the Somoza dictatorship, the artists of Nicaragua continue to be an effective force in redefining, shaping and defending their country's cultural heritage. In these years it has also become evident that the government continues to value and support all of the arts as a significant component in the formation of a national consciousness and identity. The data for the following paper is based on the author's personal experiences in Nicaragua. Starting in 1981, four summers were spent interviewing artists, visiting the places where they worked, and talking to individuals in the governmental institutions that are responsible for the promotion of the arts in Nicaragua. In this country of approximately 2.5 million people, 19% earn their livelihood as artists or artisans, of which 90% are women whose commitment to personal artistic development is matched by their commitment to the revolution. The situation in Nicaragua exemplifies the relationship of art to the process of social change.

One cannot discuss Nicaragua's artists without some understanding of the present governmental institutions that are responsible for the promotion of culture in general and more specifically the promotion of the visual arts, crafts and art education. The Ministry of Culture, directed by the priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, was established immediately after the revolution with the objective of implementing programs to make a broad variety of cultural experiences available to all segments of the population (LaDuke, 1984b). One of the Ministry's first projects was the establishment of Culture Centers which now number 23. These centers are in all the major population areas with outreach programs for the rural population. They provide a variety of classes, for children and adults, that include drawing and painting, ceramics, sewing, poetry workshops, guitar, folk dancing and theater.

The national coordinator of all the Culture Centers' art and craft programs is the painter Maria Gallo (LaDuke, 1982c) whom I interviewed in

1982, 1983 and 1984. Since each Culture Center also has an exhibit space, for the first time in their lives many students, housewives, factory workers and farmers now have the opportunity to create as well as to view art.

The Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers established in 1982, is the supportive mechanism that nurtures and encourages all of the artists. The total ASTC membership comprises 900 diverse artists that are organized into seven separate unions consisting of dancers, musicians, choral groups, poets, theater actors, circus performers and photographers. The poet, Rosarillo Murillo, was elected director of ASTC and the artist Luis Morales the director of the Artists' Union. These are the two key people who implement the cultural programs with active input from most of the artists.

The Artists' Union, consisting only of the visual artists, painters and sculptors, grew from 60 in 1982 to 90 in 1984. New membership applications are received each week for evaluation by Luis Morales and a committee of artists. Meetings are held monthly, or more frequently, based on the artist's current needs and issues. For example, sometimes there are painting critiques, or the planning of workshops, conferences and collective exhibits, or discussions relating to the frequent shortages of art supplies. More recently, the formation of Culture Brigades that visit the war zones has been a key issue.

The physical heart of the Artists' Union and the country's primary exhibition center is the Casa Fernando Gordillo, located in Managua's Parque Carmen. Luis Morales is responsible for its active exhibition schedule which primarily focuses upon collective rather than on individual exhibits of Nicaraguan professional and primitive painters and sculptors. Their work is also seen in many international exhibits, and many artists can live on the income received from sales. ASTC only takes a 20% commission which is utilized toward the packing and shipping of the art, as well as for further promotion of all arts.

Many foreign visitors and diplomatic representatives throughout the world that come to Nicaragua have recognized the exuberance, aesthetic quality and significance of contemporary Nicaraguan painting and crafts and have been buying them in quantity. Nicaragua has two distinct groups

of painters. Those labeled as "primitive" are basically self taught, having developed a detailed style of imagery, focusing on landscape and descriptive scenes and events, as discussed in the article, "Nicaragua, the Painter-Peasants of Solentiname," (LaDuke, 1984b). The other group consists of professional artists who have been trained at Nicaragua's National Fine Arts School (LaDuke, 1982a, 1983ab) or have studied abroad. They paint in diverse styles and techniques that include impressionism, surrealism and abstract expressionism. Both primitive and professional artists participate in the Artists' Union, part of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers or ASTC.

Surprisingly, even with its present military and defense concerns, the Nicaraguan government through the Ministry of the Interior continues to purchase paintings for exhibit in government buildings. The person in charge of selecting the art for public display is Orlando Sobalvarro, a prominent painter. All this activity contrasts sharply with the Somoza era when there was minimal government support for the arts, no large public exhibition centers, and artists could only depend upon a few commercial galleries for survival.

In general the level of cultural concern under Nicaragua's 45-year Somoza family dictatorship by the Somoza family can be exemplified by the illiteracy rate which averaged 50% for the urban population and 80% for the "campesinos" or peasants (Randall, 1981). An illiterate, passive population could more easily be exploited for the interests of the wealthy, one percent which controlled more than half of the land. The Somoza family alone owned five million acres of land, the size of El Salvador (Lernoux, p. 83).

Besides land reform programs and the establishment of numerous medical centers throughout the country, a massive and intensive literacy campaign was one of the most popular and successful events that occurred immediately after the revolution in which many artists participated. In 1980, during a six-month period of time, a voluntary literacy brigade was organized that included over 100,000 people. Volunteers from the United States, Europe and Latin America fanned out across the country to teach basic reading and writing skills. Illiteracy in Nicaragua has now been reduced to approximately 15%.

During 1981 and 1982 I was primarily concerned with the personal development of the artists and the style and theme of their work in the period prior to the revolution, as well as their creativity during this almost calm post-revolutionary era of progress and growth. However, by 1983 and 1984, the political situation had changed. Nicaraguans were being attacked along their Costa Rican and Honduran border zones by contras or ex-Somocistas in an escalating war. How some of the artists participated in the defense of their country during this post-revolutionary era through their creative work is a significant aspect of my interviews during 1983 and 1984.

During my July, 1983, visit, as the escalation of the covert war continued along Nicaragua's borders, I learned from Luis Morales that over 100 artists, including 13 painters, had volunteered to participate in the four Culture Brigades that were organized by the Artists' Union to visit the war zones for three-week periods of time (LaDuke, 1984a). The purpose of the Culture Brigades was to give all artists-poets, musicians, dancers, and singers, as well as visual artists an opportunity to interact with soldiers through planned and innovative cultural activities. Thus, with first-hand awareness of the danger and horror of war the artists interpret this aspect of Nicaragua's current reality through their own means and style of expression.

Most often the artists traveled to the war zones during periods of relative calm. They wore uniforms, carried rifles for self protection and many visual artists brought their sketchbooks along which they filled with drawings of their comrades (Fig. 1). However, some of the paintings which have been developed as a result of this experience are abstracted symbolic interpretations of aggression whereas others take a more literal approach. What is significant is that there is no demand upon the artists to create in any one style (Ferlinghetti, 1984).

Julie Aguirre, a mural painter whom I first interviewed in 1981, told me at our 1984 meeting that she also participated in a Culture Brigade which visited a town frequently under attack near the Honduran border. There she and two other artists were requested by the people of the town to paint a



FIGURE 1. Drawings of comrades in the war zone.  
Artist: Arnaldo Guillen



FIGURE 2. Literacy Campaign: Mural. Luis Alfonso Velazquez  
Elementary School, Managua, Nicaragua.  
Artist: Julie Aguirre.



mural on the theme of the marketplace. The artists painted in a primitive style, similar to Julie's earlier mural at the Luis Alfonso Velazquez Elementary School in Managua (Fig. 2).

Julie told me that she was also a member of the militia and participated annually in a one-month program of military training in order to learn how to organize and defend her neighborhood in case of attack. Other militia members are required to travel to the agricultural zones in order to defend the workers while they harvest the country's vital economic crops of cotton and coffee. Under constant tension and threat of war, life must go on, and Julie's life reflected this for she was preparing for a two-woman exhibit that would focus on the theme of women.

In 1983 and 1984, preparation for the July 19th celebration of the revolution included selecting a general theme reflecting the current political situation for the collective art exhibit of Nicaraguan artists at the Casa Fernando Gordillo. "Art, a Weapon of the People in Defense of the Revolution" was the 1983 slogan. The 1984 slogan also emphasized the reality of war: "Everything for the Battle Front, Everything for the Combatants." However, not all of the exhibited work reflected this theme. For example, the title of Niger Medina's painting was Landscape with Three Nudes.

In the process of following the personal development of Nicaraguan artists over a four year period of time, I remain astonished at their consistent production, on going creative development and commitment to their art while they continue to participate in the defense of their country. Many have suffered again and again the tragedy of family and comrades wounded and killed in this current three year war of aggression as well as suffering from prior personal experiences of incarceration, torture and exile.

In 1984 I had the opportunity of interviewing two artists whom I had not met in previous years, although I was already familiar with some of their work. I had long admired the decorative murals of Alejandro Canales and the sensual, surrealist female nudes painted by Niger Medina. In contrast to these artists Cecilia Rojas, currently a student and teacher at the National Fine Arts School, offered a unique woman's perspective. While each of these artists' work is stylistically and thematically diverse, their

personal stories reflect the shared pride of all of Nicaragua's artists in their cultural heritage and revolution.

### Alejandro Canales

After Alejandro Canales experienced the dynamic power of his decorative figurative images on yards rather than on inches of space, it is not surprising that he has since created a very few easel paintings "as my mind is now primarily focused on murals." Before the 1979 Revolution he had never painted a mural, but "necessity forces one to learn." To commemorate the first anniversary of the revolution, he was one of the first artists who was asked to try his hand at painting a mural at the Luis Alfonso Velazquez Elementary School, located in the 1972 earthquake destroyed district of Managua. Now thousands of international tourists annually visit this reconstructed, tree planted site in order to attend cultural activities and to admire the murals.

The theme of Canales's mural is the Literacy Campaign (Fig. 3) which it symbolically portrays through stylized, multi-colored forms of women and children, against a stark white background of the 70 by 14 foot school wall. What is particularly pleasing is Canales's personal, lyrical vision of the women whose full forms are portrayed with dignity and tenderness as they embrace a child or reach downward toward a bird or outward in space. Details such as fingers and hair are often rhythmically elongated. Rather than conforming to a stereotypical concept of form, each of his figures is a personal portrayal of the Nicaraguan people. Although he had six assistants, Canales considers the compositional challenge of such immense space as "difficult," but now, after five years of experience, "the process is much easier."

Canales was born in 1945, and at 12 years of age he was apprenticed to a carpenter, but continued to draw and paint on his own. His formal training began when he received a scholarship to the National Fine Arts School where he was then able to study drawing, painting and sculpture from 1961 until 1970.

FIGURE 3. Literacy Campaign: Mural Detail. Luis Alfonso Velazquez  
Elementary School, Managua, Nicaragua, 70' x 14'.  
Artist: Alejandro Canales.





In the years that followed, Canales struggled to maintain himself through sales of his art work. In 1977, after becoming involved in the revolutionary movement, he began to demonstrate his abilities on walls or large sheets of paper by creating quick drawings, caricatures or graffiti for street audiences that portrayed political ideas and events. Mural painting followed as a logical activity except that now his imagery is designed with more permanence and has greater aesthetic appeal.

At the time I met with Canales, he was working on an enormous vertical mural, 30 by 14 meters on the facade of the Telcor Building near the Plaza of the Revolution. Based on the theme of Communication Past and Present (Fig. 4), this Telcor mural is scheduled for completion by the 5th annual July 19th celebration of the revolution. Unlike his earlier work, the forms and background space will be completely filled with subtle mixtures of warm and cool colors which he prepares for his assistants to apply flat, without shading, within his compositional outlines.

The complex design of this immense mural begins at the top edge with a rural farm scene. Horizontal lines dissect the lower landscape area which contains a satellite dish. A vertical pole with the red and black FSLN flag leads downward to the heroic revolutionary portraits of Fonseca and Sandino. The organization FSLN or Frente Sandinista Liberacion Nacional was founded in 1961 in the revolutionary struggle to organize the people to fight against Somoza. Carlos Fonseca was one of the founding members. General Sandino was killed by Somoza in 1934 (LaFeber, p. 163; Randall, 1978, p. 8).

A black silhouetted profile of a soldier with a rifle who is using a telephone pole for an observation post leads the eye to the bottom right-hand corner of Canales' celebration mural. Even in this incomplete stage the mural's color coordination are impressively revealed.

In these past few years Canales has been kept busy with opportunities to paint murals in Managua's Ruben Dario Theater and the Social Security Building. He has also painted murals in Mozambique, Africa; Eugene, Oregon; and Seattle, Washington. His work offers a personal perspective of the integration of art, politics and the reality of war.

FIGURE 4. Communication Past and Present. Telcor Building,  
Managua, Nicaragua, 1984.  
Artist: Alejandro Canales.



### Niger Medina

Whether the theme is a typical portrait of the heroic general Sandino with his red neckerchief and sombrero (Fig. 5) or a picture of a female partially clothed, one is drawn into the atmosphere of Niger Medina's paintings less for their subjects than for his oil painting technique. In his predominately surrealistic paintings, he surrounds the smooth contours of exposed flesh, whether it is the hands and face of Sandino, or the voluptuous curves of a female torso, with deep folds of stylized clothing textures. He creates an intriguing labyrinth of light and shadow, sharp and soft edges that have a life of their own apart from the painting's theme.

Stimulated by his two older brothers, Santos and Efrin Medina, who are among Nicaragua's prominently exhibited painters, Niger at age 25 has sought to develop his own distinctive style. Though influenced by his brothers, who paint very differently from one another, Niger is essentially self taught, and for the past four years he has been exhibiting at the Casa Fernando Gordillo, supporting himself through the sale of his paintings.

Niger works consistently and believes that a "harmony of color and form should permeate each painting and that artists should be equally content." He also realizes that "the artists of Nicaragua have to take a political stand because of our current reality of war, but we should not lower our aesthetic quality in our need for national unity and the formation of our cultural heritage." Instead of war, Niger would prefer to have cultural exchange with artists from the United States. He also speaks of the significance of "international solidarity for Nicaragua's revolution manifested by many nations and people throughout the world."

Niger views himself as "still in the process of developing and breaking with my past influences as I hate to stagnate within one single style or form of painting." However, it is to Niger's credit, with Nicaragua's abundant supply of Sandino portraits silhouetted on doors and walls, or painted on posters, banners and billboards, that his portrait is not lost in the crowd. Beyond the familiar pose and features, the

FIGURE 5. Sandino. Oil on canvas, 40" x 52", 1983.  
Artist: Niger Medina.





aesthetic richness of vibrant dark and light pattern, textural detail and compositional elements compel one's eyes to linger on this particular Sandino portrait.

Since he is worried about becoming too fixed within a certain style and theme, Niger plans to move soon to a coastal town and develop new painting themes based upon the lives of the fishermen. Due to his slow meticulous technique and the fairly large scale of many of his canvases, he produces less than a dozen paintings a year. Although much of his work is not political, he still feels totally accepted and integrated within the Artists' Union. The artists respect his personal integrity as well as the quality of his work.

All of the artists are proud that Nicaragua has plans for the future construction of a major national art museum. Many world famous artists have donated their paintings to the museum which has been postponed because of the war. Niger believes that "all kinds of art experience should be available for the people, including abstract, surrealist and primitive styles of painting rather than only in the possession of private families."

In contrast to his portrait of Sandino, Niger's elegant, brown-toned female nudes confront us with a timeless and classical view of a stable, war-free reality for which people everywhere long. In this sense his imagery is a refreshing respite and departure from the reality that does exist.

#### Cecilia Rojas

Since the 1979 revolution women have begun to appear in greater numbers both as students and as faculty members of Nicaragua's historically male-dominated National Fine Arts School. After 12 years of teaching elementary school and raising two children, Cecilia Rojas decided in 1978 to re-enter school as an art student. Now, while in her final year of study and preparation for her thesis exhibit, she also teaches two painting classes at the Fine Arts School. Rojas explains that "even since the revolution, with tuition and art supplies provided free by the government, it still is not

easy for women and especially women with children to study art as their economic maintenance is a problem."

Using the facade of masks as the focus of her imagery, Rojas penetrates beneath the surface to reveal the use of masks for traditional, symbolic as well as contemporary revolutionary roles. She has chosen to paint masks instead of people's faces because at age 35 she considers herself "too old to develop the technical capacities for realistic portraiture." However, masks have provided her with a stylistic and thematic basis for developing her self expression.

The painting, LITERACY CAMPAIGN (Fig. 6), was inspired by documentary photographs of Nicaragua's post-revolutionary literacy program in which she also participated. She considers this event as "one of my most formative personal experiences." For the first time thousands of young students and teachers, organized in brigades, left the cities to teach basic reading and writing skills for six months in the countryside to families of campesinos. This was the first time that many middle class women had ever left their parental homes and experienced the hardships of life in the countryside.

In her painting Rojas shows a tender relationship between the teacher and the learner portrayed with masks - one sunbronzed, one fair - hovering over a book. A strong linear rhythm as well as three-dimensional or sculptured quality is created by the dark outer edge of the simplified forms of the sombrero, torso, book and mask as each color is blended smoothly from dark to light. The drama of her themes is amplified by her use of partially visible body forms that support the huge masks which dominate the canvas.

In her brief few years of dedication and maturation, Rojas has deliberately opted to develop her individual style and color sensitivity. Relying less on heavily applied and textured pigments utilized by many of the professional artists, she carefully blends warm yellow and red ochres and juxtaposes them with the deliberately cool dominant tones of grey blue and blue-greens. The simplicity of her carefully selected and designed forms seems well integrated with her color selection and application. In selecting

FIGURE 6. Literacy Campaign: Oil on Masonite, 42" x 48",  
Artist: Cecilia Rojas.



masks as her means of symbolizing life, Rojas is able to portray the continuity between Nicaragua's past and present.

Masks have been worn by the revolutionary participants to obscure their identity during times of armed conflict as in the town of Masaya in their 1978-79 insurrection against the Somoza dictatorship. These revolutionary fighters were afraid of reprisals upon their families by Somoza's National Guard if their identities were known. Traditional masks which portray the Spanish conquest, the forces of good and evil, and the various folk tales and myths are donned annually during innumerable festivals and Saints' Days celebrations throughout Nicaragua, such as the 1984 Saint's Day celebration in the town of Jinotepe.

At present Rojas is also a member of the Artists' Union of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers. She participates in group exhibits but is working hard to complete 20 paintings for her first one-person exhibit at the Casa Fernando Gordillo in conjunction with her Master's thesis. Since the Revolution Cecilia Rojas will be only the second woman to graduate from the National Fine Arts School, where she hopes to continue teaching and developing as a painter. As Rojas continues to challenge herself thematically, to probe beneath the surface and to express her personal and national identity, one wonders what painting themes she, as well as the other artists, will develop in the future, when there is peace.

The Director of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers, poet Rosario Murillo, summarizes the role of Nicaraguan artists:

....our fundamental purpose is to create art of high quality that reflects the reality of our people. For this goal there are no limitations of established formulas or styles. All the doors of the imagination are open to the artist's creative capacity, knowing that it is the revolutionary spirit of the artists that determines the capabilities of transmitting or recreating reality in aesthetic terms, and it is their work that provides us with revolutionary art. . . and that this revolutionary art is being created by artists who are making and not just observing the Revolution. (Ferlinghetti, 1984)



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